

# I am the chosen one: Narcissism in the backdrop of self-determination theory

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## Abstract

**Objective:** This theoretical article discusses the relevance of self-determination theory (SDT) for narcissism, a classic topic in self-theory.

**Method and Results:** The trait of narcissism reflects a self-aggrandizing, dominant, and manipulative interpersonal orientation that feeds on exaggerated perceptions of agency, but not communion. The article embeds narcissism in the five mini-theories of SDT (organismic integration, causality orientations, basic needs, cognitive evaluation, and goal contents) and considers research directions that can explore synergies between key constructs from SDT and narcissism.

**Conclusions:** SDT can serve as a foundation for a deeper understanding of narcissism. From the other end, narcissism can enrich SDT by explaining variations in motivational processes.

## KEYWORDS

basic needs, leadership, motivation, narcissism, self-determination theory

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Self-determination theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2017), as Sheldon and Prentice (2019) stated, may provide an account of “human nature [that] could serve as a foundation or tent pole, for weaving a web across all of the many domains and disciplines of personality psychology” (pp. 6).

We examine in this article how SDT can function as the bedrock for gaining a deeper understanding of a classic topic in personality and self-theory: narcissism. We also consider how the narcissism literature may inform SDT by accounting for variation in motivational processes.

We begin with a justification for our focus on narcissism. We subsequently engage in a brief historical overview of the construct of narcissism before we define it and discuss its judgmental and behavioral manifestations, as well as consider its etiology and breakdown into two facets (i.e., grandiose and vulnerable). Next, we situate narcissism within each of five SDT mini-theories (Sheldon & Prentice, 2019): organismic integration, causality orientations, cognitive evaluation, basic needs, and goal contents. Finally, we formulate promising research directions by exploring synergies between key

constructs from SDT and narcissism, and we raise relevant issues.

### 1.1 | Justifying our focus on narcissism

We focus on the trait of narcissism, reflecting a pompous, forceful, and conniving social orientation (Thomaes, Brummelman, & Sedikides, 2018), for several reasons. To begin, narcissism has been a popular topic of inquiry, and increasingly so. Although it is rooted in psychodynamic theorizing, narcissism has attracted the theoretical and empirical scrutiny of personality and social psychology (Morf, Horvath, & Torchetti, 2011), clinical psychology (Campbell & Miller, 2011), developmental psychology (Thomaes & Brummelman, 2016), organizational psychology (Judge, LePine, & Rich, 2006), management and decision making (Chatterjee & Hambrick, 2007), and sports psychology (Roberts, Woodman, & Sedikides, 2018). As such, narcissism has the potential to bridge seemingly divergent perspectives or literatures, such as psychodynamic and personality, cognitive and affective/motivation, or, as in this article, self-theory and SDT.

Another reason for our focus on narcissism is that levels of this trait have been rising at the societal level. An antecedent of narcissism is individualism (Miller et al., 2015). Over the past several decades, Western culture has become increasingly individualistic (Santos, Varnum, & Grossman, 2017) and increasingly narcissistic. Cross-temporal meta-analyses of American college students conducted between 1982 and 2006 are consistent with the latter assertion: More recent generations report higher levels of narcissism (Twenge & Campbell, 2009; Twenge & Foster, 2010; Twenge, Konrath, Foster, Campbell, & Bushman, 2008; for an opposing view and a response, see Wetzel et al., 2017, and Campbell, Twenge, Konrath, Cooper, & Foster, 2018, respectively). East Asian culture is also becoming increasingly individualistic (Santos et al., 2017) and narcissistic. Evidence from China (Cai, Kwan, & Sedikides, 2012) and South Korea (Lee, Benavides, Heo, & Park, 2014) is also consistent with the latter assertion.

The final reason for our focus on this trait is that narcissism has been seemingly rising in many professional settings (Sedikides & Campbell, 2017). It is seen as a leader's trait, and so the pipeline to modern organizations involves the encouragement and cultivation of it. For example, narcissism is relatively high among popular college majors, such as business (Sautter, Brown, Littvay, Sautter, & Bearnese, 2008), and among business professionals (Jonason, Wee, Li, & Jackson, 2014; Mathieu & St-Jean, 2013), as well as among reality TV show contestants, musicians, and actors (Rubinstein, 2016; Young & Pinsky, 2006). Also, the sitting US president, Trump, appears to display narcissistic characteristics (Lee, 2017), perhaps reflecting or even spearheading the visibility of narcissism at the cultural level.

## 2 | NARCISSISM

### 2.1 | Historical overview and definition

The Roman poet Ovid (43 BC–AD 17 or 18) narrated in his *Metamorphoses* the story of Narcissus, a young hunter known for his handsomeness. Narcissus rejects the romantic overtures of the mountain nymph Echo. She turns to her protector Goddess, Aphrodite, who vengefully cajoles the youth to a pool where he falls in love with his own reflection. Echo, unvalidated, disappears only to be heard as a voice repeating others' last words, whereas Narcissus pines away for love of his own image and changes into the eponymous flower.

Psychodynamic theorists fused these two characters into one, termed *narcissistic personality*. It is marked by self-lionization and dismissiveness (like Narcissus) and by excessive need for validation (like Echo). Personality and social psychologists, who conceptualize narcissism as a trait varying on a continuum, concur. Narcissists (i.e., those high on the

continuum) are conceited, entitled, and calculating (Raskin & Terry, 1988). They come across as self-assured, if not bold, and as appealing or charismatic (Back, Schmukle, & Egloff, 2010). They crave attention and adoration, manifested in their proclivity to dominate conversation (Buffardi & Campbell, 2008) and in their overuse of social media for self-presentational purposes (McCain & Campbell, 2016). They view themselves as special, unique, and great—what Ernest Jones (2007) labeled “the God Complex”—while fantasizing about power, status, and social recognition (Zeigler-Hill et al., 2018). Finally, they are argumentative and antagonistic (Sedikides & Campbell, 2017).

### 2.2 | Judgmental and behavioral manifestations

Narcissists (vs. low narcissists) are more than eager to tout their superiority in the agentic domain (e.g., ambition, intelligence, dominance), but not in the communal domain (e.g., helpfulness, warmth, kindness; Campbell, Rudich, & Sedikides, 2002; Sedikides, Campbell, Reeder, Elliot, & Gregg, 2002; but see Gebauer, Sedikides, Verplanken, & Maio, 2012). They claim, for example, that they are more competent, but not more cooperative, than others (Grijalva & Zhang, 2016). Although getting ahead is important to them, getting along is instrumental (Nagler, Reiter, Furtner, & Rauthmann, 2014). Indeed, they are low on agreeableness, empathy, shame, and guilt, while being callous and unapologetic (Hepper, Hart, Meek, Cisek, & Sedikides, 2014; Leunissen, Sedikides, & Wildschut, 2017). They generally also hold others in low regard, even people they consider friends (Park & Colvin, 2015): Narcissists view members of their social networks through a dismissive, disparaging lens (Lamkin, Clifton, Campbell, & Miller, 2014). They also derogate individuals (i.e., competitors) who perform better than them (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998). In organizational contexts, narcissists are poor mentors (Allen et al., 2009), and in relational contexts, they choose partners who admire them over partners who offer intimacy (Campbell, 1999). Further, narcissists are less committed and more likely to look for alternatives (Campbell & Foster, 2002), especially when they know that their partner is strongly invested in the relationship (Foster & Campbell, 2005). In all, narcissists feel comfortable in competitive, achievement-oriented situations, but they have trouble developing effective, long-term relationships.

Narcissists may assert their agentic superiority, but do they act on their words? Are they successful on agency? Being approach oriented and reward or novelty seeking (Miller et al., 2009), narcissists take risks out of overconfidence: They predict that they will outperform others on knowledge tests. Yet, the quality of their answers does not differ from that of low narcissists (Campbell, Goodie, & Foster, 2004). And their overconfidence may hurt them: When betting on

the correctness of their answers, they lose points (Campbell et al., 2004). Moreover, when they receive negative feedback, they blame others (Campbell, Reeder, Sedikides, & Elliot, 2000) or disengage from its consequences (Thomaes & Sedikides, 2016). Overall, then, narcissists are no more effective or competent than non-narcissists in the agentic domain (Sedikides & Campbell, 2017), although this conclusion needs to be qualified; narcissists perform relatively well when they believe that winning a competition will reap them the benefits of acclaim (Wallace & Baumeister, 2002).

Narcissists are self-assured, charming, and energetic, which are prototypical leader characteristics (Smith & Foti, 1998). Indeed, they are rated as leaders (Judge et al., 2006) and considered “managerial material” even by experienced interviewers (Schnure, 2010). Cognizant of their strengths (Carlson, 2013), and armed with desire for status (Horton & Sedikides, 2009), narcissists pursue leadership positions (Benson, Jordan, & Christie, 2016) and are often selected for them (Brunell et al., 2008), especially at times of uncertainty (Nevicka, De Hoogh, Van Vianen, & Beersma, 2011). But are they effective leaders?

There is some evidence that narcissists are perceived as transformational leaders (Judge et al., 2006), at least in regard to the charismatic component of idealized influence (e.g., instilling pride in subordinates; Khoo & Burch, 2008). Also, the more narcissistic US presidents are seen to be, the more charismatic they are rated (Deluga, 1997). Moreover, narcissistic leaders may experience short-term success as they “take no prisoners” in competing against business rivals; that is, as pretend forestry company CEOs, narcissists harvest disproportionate amounts of timber compared to other CEOs (Campbell, Bush, Brunell, & Shelton, 2005). Finally, the meta-analytic relation between narcissism and leadership effectiveness is curvilinear in the form of an inverted U: Moderately narcissistic leaders are more effective than leaders low or high on narcissism (Grijalva, Harms, Newman, Gaddis, & Fraley, 2015).

Yet, the bulk of the evidence suggests that narcissists are no more effective leaders than non-narcissists. They quickly lose their charismatic appeal, as their inadequacies become salient to their subordinates (Ong, Roberts, Arthur, Woodman, & Akehurst, 2016). These inadequacies include self-presentational pomposity, disregard for social etiquette, lack of interpersonal connection with subordinates, and obstruction of information exchange among employees (Schoel, Stahlberg, & Sedikides, 2015; Sedikides, Hoorens, & Dufner, 2015). In addition, narcissistic leaders take excessive risk in investment decisions, selecting over time more volatile stocks and ending up losing money (Foster, Misra, & Reidy, 2009). Their competitive business strategy in simulated forestry company CEO situations backfires, increasing the cost of common goods (i.e., leading to rapid deforestation; Campbell et al., 2005). As CEOs, they not only fail to increase their companies’ fortunes (Chatterjee &

Hambrick, 2007), but they are also likely to hurt their companies’ future by undercutting the relation between entrepreneurial orientation (e.g., organizational innovativeness) and shareholder value (Engelen, Neumann, & Schmidt, 2013). As political leaders (i.e., US presidents), they may be more likely to win the popular vote, but they are also more likely to be impeached (Watts et al., 2013). Indeed, their leadership effectiveness is compromised by their tendency to get mired in unethical decisions and practices that often harm others (Campbell & Siedor, 2016). In conclusion, despite their claims to the contrary, evidence indicates that narcissists do not perform better than non-narcissists in the agency domain, and they fare worse in the communion domain.

## 2.3 | Etiology, and grandiose versus vulnerable narcissism

As a trait, narcissism is subject to both genetic and environmental influences (Luo, Cai, Sedikides, & Song, 2014). Here, we emphasize the latter, and in particular parental socialization practices.

### 2.3.1 | Etiology

Psychodynamic theorists offer opposing accounts of the etiology of narcissism. According to Kernberg (1975) and Kohut (1977), narcissism is due to lack of parental warmth or love. Narcissistic children develop an inflated self-concept as a defense mechanism against parental emotional abandonment and against rage following abandonment. They put themselves on a pedestal as a way to gain approval from others—a move intended to compensate for lack of parental approval. According to Millon (1981), however, narcissism is the outgrowth of excessive parental love and adulation. Such socialization practices habituate the narcissist to entitled treatment, and any deviation from it will be met with hostility, if not aggression.

Although cross-sectional studies have produced mixed results (Thomaes et al., 2018), a recent longitudinal investigation yielded evidence consistent with Millon’s (1981) assertions. Parents of narcissistic children overvalue them, showering them with compliments of specialness and entitlement (Brummelman et al., 2015). Of course, whether the child will develop into an adult narcissist depends on many factors, such as temperament (Elliot & Thrash, 2002), generational cohort (Bianchi, 2014), or cultural environment (Miller et al., 2015; Twenge & Foster, 2010).

### 2.3.2 | Grandiose versus vulnerable narcissism

Psychodynamic theorists (Freud, 1914/1957; Kernberg, 1975; Kohut, 1977) proposed that narcissistic

self-enhancement and craving for adoration are self-protection mechanisms. Narcissists portray a sanitized self-image in an attempt to conceal a deep-seated sense of inadequacy. Their self-exaltation defends against their underlying vulnerability.

Narcissism has a common core consisting of inflated self-beliefs and contempt for others (i.e., the Narcissus–Echo nexus). At the same time, narcissism is characterized by a two-dimensional structure with distinct psychological and interpersonal correlates (Wink, 1991; see also Miller et al., 2014). Grandiose narcissism is linked with extraversion, exhibitionism, self-assurance, and aggression. Vulnerable narcissism is linked with introversion, anxiety, and defensiveness—a neuroticism constellation (Miller et al., 2017).

The distinction between grandiose and vulnerable narcissism can also be made in regard to self-esteem. Overall, the relation between narcissism and self-esteem is weak or modest (Thomaes et al., 2018). However, this relation becomes attenuated when the scales assessing narcissism improve in validity (Brown & Zeigler-Hill, 2004) or when narcissists are encouraged to truthfully report their self-esteem (Myers & Zeigler-Hill, 2012). In addition, as latent class analyses indicate, there are as many narcissists with low self-esteem as narcissists with high self-esteem (Nelemans et al., 2017). Narcissists with high (and likely stable) self-esteem, then, are likely to be grandiose, whereas narcissists with low (and likely unstable) self-esteem are likely to be vulnerable.

Researchers often assess grandiose narcissism with the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Terry, 1988). It features 40 forced-choice items, each consisting of a narcissistic (e.g., “I insist upon getting the respect that is due me”) and a non-narcissistic (e.g., “I usually get the respect I deserve”) statement. Shortened NPI versions also exist, such as the forced-choice 13-item NPI (Gentile et al., 2013). Researchers often assess vulnerable narcissism with the 10-item Hypersensitive Narcissism Scale (Hendin & Cheek, 1997; sample item: “My feelings are easily hurt by ridicule or the slighting remarks of others”). Alternatives also exist, such as the Five-Factor Narcissism Inventory (Miller et al., 2014).

### 3 | NARCISSISM AND SDT

We start by asking why narcissists behave the way they do. Indeed, they often seem to shoot themselves in the foot via their relentless engagement in self-presentational bombast and pretension (Sedikides et al., 2015; Steinmetz, Sezer, & Sedikides, 2017), even in situations that call for modesty (Campbell et al., 2000; Collins & Stukas, 2008). How can they be exclusive and alienating all the while seeking adoration and acclaim? Answers to these questions lie in

motivational analysis. SDT provides the conceptual tools for such an analysis, as it can help untangle the complex power dynamics between narcissists and their interactants (e.g., subordinates), given that aspects of SDT (e.g., the mini-theory of cognitive evaluation) are highly relevant to authority/subordinate relationships.

We consider next whether and how SDT provides a foundation upon which future narcissism research might be built, and also whether and how narcissism might clarify tenets of SDT. In particular, we turn to five SDT mini-theories (Ryan & Deci, 2017) that Sheldon and Prentice (2019) summarized: organismic integration, causality orientations, basic needs, cognitive evaluation, and goal contents. Each can serve as a platform for gaining insight into narcissism. We restate briefly each mini-theory and proceed to contextualize narcissism within it. Finally, we offer promising research directions.

#### 3.1 | Organismic integration and causality orientations mini-theories

According to the *organismic integration mini-theory*, a behavior can reflect lack of motivation, that is, amotivation, or could be motivated by reasons that are classifiable along a continuum of controlled (left end) to autonomous (right end) forms of motivation—the so-called relative autonomy continuum (Sheldon, Osin, Gordeeva, & Suchkov, 2017). In particular, at the far left of the continuum is amotivation, which reflects helplessness and lack of either autonomous or controlled motivation for action (e.g., “I don’t see any point in continuing studying at my college”). Moving toward the right is external regulation. This is the most controlled type of motivation, and it reflects behaviors undertaken because of rewards, due to fear of punishment, or to obtain social approval. To the right is introjected regulation, also a controlled type of motivation, which reflects internal pressures (e.g., feelings of shame or guilt) or contingencies (e.g., ego involvement, conditional self-worth). Even further right, identified and integrated regulations involve acting because one believes in the importance of the behavior and the purpose it serves. Identified motivation is still an extrinsic type of motivation, as the person may not be enjoying the activity (e.g., as she attends yet another city council meeting). However, given that the person feels willing rather than forced in the process, identified motivation “crosses a rubicon” to the autonomous side of the continuum. Integrated regulation reflects motivation based on highly internalized behaviors—those that are part of one’s core values and sense of self (e.g., daily exercise is a core part of one’s “healthy me”). Nevertheless, it is intrinsic motivation that occupies the rightward extreme of the relative autonomy continuum. Intrinsic motivation reflects behavioral engagement that is due to enjoyment of the experience of doing the activity, which is sometimes accompanied



by a sense of accomplishment. Over time, individuals have a developmental tendency to internalize their motivations for behavior, moving from the left to the right on the autonomy continuum, and this natural process can be fostered or undermined by the social context. A large volume of research in multiple life domains (e.g., healthcare, education, work, sport, and parenting) has established that autonomous forms of motivation are linked to more adaptive affective, cognitive, and behavioral outcomes than controlled forms of motivation or amotivation (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

We would expect much of the characteristic behavior of narcissists to be locatable on the controlled side of the relative autonomy continuum (Sheldon et al., 2017). Narcissists' behaviors often serve as a means to acquiring external rewards, reverence, and approval from others. Narcissists' motivation is also likely to reflect strong self-worth contingencies, strong hedonic approach motivation, and strong internal pressures to establish superiority over others in addition to gaining their approval, loyalty, and worship. These proclivities seem to map well onto the introjected and external forms of motivational regulation, discussed above. As such, we would expect that both grandiose and vulnerable narcissism would be positively associated with controlled motivation.

However, a more complex picture may emerge. Controlled motivation involves concern for others' opinions or concern for being judged by standards external to the self. Narcissists apparently jettison these two sources of vulnerability (while desiring unbridled adoration), in exalting their own judgment and in viewing their own qualities as superior to those of others. Narcissists also have strong self-esteem motivation (Brummelman, Thomaes, & Sedikides, 2016; Sedikides, Rudich, Gregg, Kumashiro, & Rusbult, 2004) that, according to Sheldon et al. (2017), falls on the autonomous end of the continuum, just across the dividing line from introjected guilt-based motivation, which is a controlled form of motivation. Further, it is likely that narcissists fluctuate considerably in their quality of motivation, vulnerable more so than grandiose, given their contingent self-esteem and underlying fragility. Perhaps narcissists at times experience higher highs of intrinsic motivation and identified motivation ("I enjoy the adoration I get" or "This task is really serving my goals"), which may reverse at other times to lower lows ("The task and the cause are not earning me the recognition I crave and deserve!"). Stated otherwise, we predict that narcissists fluctuate more over time in their overall quality of motivation (due to variations in need satisfaction and the degree to which the social environment is need-supportive), from autonomous to controlled motivation, compared to non-narcissists.

This fluctuation may be more precipitous for vulnerable than grandiose narcissists. A longitudinal study of fluctuating motivations, across the relative autonomy continuum, will yield insights about the dynamic processes that undergird narcissism.

*Causality orientations mini-theory* (Deci & Ryan, 1985) makes predictions similar to those of the organismic integration mini-theory with regard to *generalized* motivations for behavioral engagement, as opposed to their specific motivations to engage in more domain-specific behaviors. According to the causality orientations mini-theory, people develop predispositions for a helpless or "impersonal" motivational orientation (the person acts without a firm intention and with low expectancies), controlled orientation (the person orients toward controls in the environment, in order to adapt to it), or autonomous orientation (the person orients toward choices in the environment, and opportunities to express the self). Causality orientations can be assessed with the General Causality Orientations Scale (Deci & Ryan, 1985), which consists of 12 vignettes and 36 items.

We would expect narcissists to have primarily a controlled orientation, for the same reasons outlined above—that is, they solicit targets to impress and rivals to best. However, the picture may also be more intricate. Narcissists may at times have a strong control orientation (seeking out the rules and contingencies in the situation, in order to extract rewards), but may at other times shift to a stronger autonomy orientation, when they feel confident enough to move beyond their self-based concerns (e.g., when they experience a self-esteem boost through a self-affirmation manipulation; Thomaes, Bushman, Orobio de Castro, Cohen, & Denissen, 2009). In keeping with speculations that narcissists are labile due to their underlying instability and neediness, we might expect to observe a less stable causality orientation profile, across times and situations, compared to non-narcissists. This fluctuation will be greater among vulnerable narcissists than among grandiose narcissists. These hypotheses can also be tested in longitudinal research.

### 3.2 | Basic needs and cognitive evaluation mini-theories

According to the *basic needs mini-theory*, humans have three basic needs: autonomy (i.e., engaging in behavior that reflects one's interests or values), competence (i.e., being effective in valued and challenging pursuits), and relatedness (i.e., having close and satisfying bonds with others, feeling accepted and cared for by others, as well as caring for them). When these three needs are satisfied, individuals are likely to report autonomous forms of motivation, psychological well-being, and adaptive cognition, affect, or behavior (Ryan & Deci, 2017). In contrast, when these needs are frustrated, individuals are likely to feel controlled in their motivation or feel amotivated, and to report psychological ill-being as well as maladaptive cognition, affect, or behavior (Bartholomew, Ntoumanis, Cuevas-Campos, & Lonsdale, 2014; Costa, Ntoumanis, & Bartholomew, 2015).

Where do narcissists stand on these three needs? They have a high opinion of themselves: They are overconfident

and overestimate their ability. Also, they are not particularly concerned with maintaining healthy relationships with others: They are indifferent (at best) about others' well-being. It would appear, then, that narcissists are likely to be high on satisfaction of the needs for autonomy and competence, but low on satisfaction of the need for relatedness.

From an SDT perspective (Ryan, Deci, & Vansteenkiste, 2016; Ryan, Deci, Grolnick, & La Guardia, 2006), though, narcissists may be viewed as suffering from needs deficits. Their abrasive and bold interpersonal style, along with their relational aggressiveness, may function to compensate for underlying shortfalls or frustrations in autonomy, competence, and relatedness (although the evidence for the so-called mask model of narcissism has been inconsistent; Fatfouta & Schröder-Abé, 2018). Further, the deficit, if present, would likely be larger for vulnerable narcissists than for grandiose narcissists.

Researchers could test these ideas by linking grandiose and vulnerable narcissism to the reported satisfaction or frustration of the three basic needs. The needs could be measured with an instrument such as the 24-item Basic Psychological Need Satisfaction and Frustration Scale (Chen et al., 2015). We would expect for need frustration, especially need for relatedness, to be a positive predictor of grandiose narcissism, but weakly so. However, vulnerable narcissism would be strongly predicted by the frustration of all three needs. The latter results pattern would fit the notion that vulnerable narcissism largely reflects neuroticism (Miller et al., 2017), given that individuals with this type of narcissism long for need satisfaction and are driven by need deficits. The experience of need deficits might also cause people to engage in need-satisfying efforts. One important way narcissists may derive competence is through downward social comparison (performance orientation; Elliot, 2008), and this practice may be influential in keeping them from developing intimate bonds with others. Alternatively, narcissists may pursue relatedness via others' recognition of their competence. Such a trade-off will likely escalate negative outcomes over time (e.g., "They don't like me? I'll show them! What, they still don't like me?"). Finally, narcissists may pursue need substitutes (e.g., displaying wealth as a substitute for competence) and not true need satisfaction (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Hence, in the long term, they may experience difficulties due to the absence of high-quality psychological nutrition. For both grandiose and vulnerable narcissism, longitudinal designs may be best suited to explain how needs deficits drive pursuits for need satisfaction or need substitutes, and how substitute experiences may then drive further deficits in the long term.

The *cognitive evaluation mini-theory* is concerned with how situational factors support or undermine intrinsic motivation. Earlier work focused on the degree to which the social context can undermine intrinsic motivation and be controlling (i.e., autonomy thwarting) by promoting contingent rewards

and praise, or by using excessive surveillance and imposing non-negotiated deadlines. In contrast, the cognitive evaluation mini-theory posited that a social context can promote intrinsic motivation by supporting individuals' autonomy and competence (see meta-analysis of the effects of rewards on intrinsic motivation by Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 1999).

More recently, work in the SDT literature has taken a broader view of the social context by examining how it supports or thwarts all three psychological needs (Ryan & Deci, 2017). The terms *need support* and *need thwarting* have been used to characterize power/expertise relationships (e.g., teacher and student, healthcare professional and patient, coach and athlete) and how such relationships affect psychological need satisfaction or frustration, as well as the whole spectrum of motivational regulations proposed by SDT.

A need-supportive interpersonal style satisfies all three basic needs proposed by SDT by, for example, offering meaningful choice, seeking input from others, and acknowledging their perspectives or feelings, providing constructive feedback, and contributing warmth and unconditional regard. In contrast, a need-thwarting interpersonal style controls behavior through pressuring or intimidating tactics, rejects or belittles others, and devalues their efforts or accomplishments (Ntoumanis, Quested, Reeve, & Cheon, 2018; Weinstein, Legate, Ryan, Sedikides, & Cozzolino, 2017).

Will narcissists be need supportive? Not so—according to the literature, they will not be (Matosic, Ntoumanis, & Quested, 2016). As a reminder, narcissists are dominant and authoritarian, looking to assert their superiority over others and to attract their adoration. They are low on empathy and prone to making solipsistic, egocentric decisions that serve their interests, often at the expense or harm of others. They are intolerant of criticism and turn antagonistic when they receive it, derogating or intimidating its sources. They are also manipulative, blaming others for failure or inducing guilt in others. These characteristics indicate that narcissists in positions of power will frequently enact need-thwarting behaviors.

Matosic et al. (2017) put part of this hypothesis to test. They examined the autonomy-supportive versus autonomy-thwarting (i.e., controlling) styles of 211 professionally qualified coaches in a variety of sports (e.g., football, swimming, athletics, and tennis) by constructing and administering 12 vignettes that described common situations in the relevant sport setting. The situations invited a coaching response that reflected an autonomy-supportive versus controlling style. A sample vignette is as follows:

Upon the end of an important league game, the coach gathered his team on the field to discuss the team's defeat. After the coach finished talking, a team captain stood up criticising the coach for the way the team played. The coach

was visibly insulted and became intensely hostile in response to the criticism.

The coaches indicated what they would do in this situation by selecting one of two options: “Invite the player to a one-on-one meeting, to discuss how things might be resolved” (autonomy support) versus “Shout to the player, threatening his captain’s position” (controlling). Coach narcissism positively predicted controlling coach behaviors, but it did not predict autonomy-supportive coach behaviors.

The above findings were replicated by Matosic, Ntoumanis, Boardley, Stenling, and Sedikides (2016) using self-report measures of autonomy-supportive and controlling behaviors. These authors additionally demonstrated that low empathy (but not dominance) mediated the positive indirect effects of narcissism on controlling interpersonal style, respectively. In another study, Matosic, Ntoumanis, Boardley, and Sedikides (2018) replicated the positive relation between narcissism and controlling behaviors, while showing that effectiveness beliefs about a controlling interpersonal style mediated the relation between adaptive narcissism and controlling coach behaviors. These findings, which link narcissism with autonomy thwarting/interpersonal control, could explain, at least in part, the narcissists’ increasing unpopularity among their subordinates over time (Sedikides & Campbell, 2017). Future research would do well to examine how narcissism is associated with relatedness-thwarting behaviors and competence-thwarting behaviors.

Future research would also do well to address how narcissists act when they are in a subordinate (rather than an authority) position. It is possible that they will react strongly and negatively against need-thwarting (vs. need-supportive) behaviors on the part of their superiors. As a reminder, however, narcissists were likely controlled by the excessive praise of their parents (Brummelman et al., 2015). From this perspective, narcissists, in particular vulnerable narcissists, may tolerate, and perhaps even at times seek out, control from other authority figures. At the very least, narcissists (compared to non-narcissists) may fluctuate highly from seeking control to seeking autonomy support, and vulnerable ones more so than grandiose ones.

### 3.3 | Goal contents mini-theory

The *goal contents mini-theory* is concerned with the objects or aims toward which behavior is directed. Such objects (i.e., one’s goal targets or life aspirations) have been classified into intrinsic or extrinsic (Grouzet et al., 2005). Examples of intrinsic goal content are personal growth, emotional intimacy, and enduring relationships. Examples of extrinsic goal content are image, materialism, and status. Intrinsic goal striving is associated with satisfaction of the basic needs, as it affords both self-expression (e.g., authenticity; Sedikides, Slabu,

Lenton, & Thomaes, 2017) and interpersonal or community connection. In contrast, extrinsic goal pursuit is associated with lack of satisfaction and may even lead to frustration of the basic needs if pursued vigorously (Ryan & Deci, 2017). The goal contents mini-theory provides a bridge for linking the person’s goal pursuits to the broader cultural environment.

Researchers often assess intrinsic and extrinsic goals with the Aspirations Index (Kasser & Ryan, 1993, 1996). This index includes both intrinsic aspirations (i.e., personal growth, meaningful relationships, and community contributions) and extrinsic aspirations (i.e., image, fame, and wealth). Each aspiration is assessed by five items. Participants rate the personal importance of each aspiration, their likelihood of attaining each aspiration, and the degree to which they believe they have attained each aspiration. We would expect that narcissists, especially grandiose ones, would value and pursue extrinsic (compared to intrinsic) goals (Abeyta, Routledge, & Sedikides, 2017; Sedikides, Cisek, & Hart, 2011). Further, we expect that this effect might be explained by controlled motivation. Put otherwise, narcissists’ pursuit and attainment of extrinsic goals may be caused by their robust motivation to validate their self-worth and attract adoration.

## 4 | CONCLUDING REMARKS

We argued that SDT provides a solid foundation for exploring issues that surround the study of narcissism. SDT can furnish the conceptual and empirical tools required for a deeper understanding of the motivation, psychological needs, and goal aspirations of narcissists—both grandiose and vulnerable. Equally, narcissism can contribute to the growing empirical evidence on the role of personality factors as antecedents of need-supportive and need-thwarting interpersonal styles.

Systematic empirical effort will be required to test the ideas we put forward in this article. Cross-sectional studies will need to be followed up by longitudinal designs, experience sampling methodologies, and laboratory experiments. Longitudinal designs (e.g., over the course of a fiscal year in an educational, a corporate, or a sports setting) could test whether need frustration and extrinsic goal aspirations drive narcissists to thwart the needs of others as a means of achieving desirable outcomes that act as substitutes of true need satisfaction. Experience sampling methodology could shed further light on these issues by testing the time lags of such processes within and across days. Further, laboratory experiments could examine whether interventions to reduce narcissism (e.g., empathy training; Hepper, Hart, & Sedikides, 2014) can buffer the degree to which narcissists will engage in need-thwarting behaviors when interacting with others. Equally, promoting intrinsic goal aspirations and creating environments that are need supportive (Ntoumanis et al., 2018) can decrease the needs deficits of narcissists.

The links between SDT and grandiose narcissism can also be expanded by considering additional facets of narcissism. One is admiration versus rivalry (Back et al., 2013). The admiration component reflects unbridled self-enhancement, whereas the rivalry component reflects self-protective antagonism. Another facet of grandiose narcissism concerns the distinction between agentic and communal (Gebauer et al., 2012). Agentic narcissism reflects satisfaction of core self-motives (i.e., power, esteem, grandiosity, entitlement) in the agentic domain (i.e., by pursuing acts that benefit the self, such as achievement), whereas communal narcissism reflects satisfaction of core self-motives in the communal domain (i.e., by pursuing acts that benefit others, such as helping). It is worth exploring whether and how these two facets of narcissism map differently onto SDT constructs.

Another promising research direction (a point we touched upon under the section Basic Needs and Cognitive Evaluation Mini-Theories) would involve focusing on settings where narcissists in positions of authority or power interact with or instruct others who are also narcissistic. How do motivation and psychological needs play out? Would narcissistic subordinates find a need-thwarting interpersonal style (e.g., of their supervisor) less motivationally damaging than subordinates low on narcissism? From an SDT perspective, this scenario is unlikely, as such an interpersonal style will be motivationally detrimental for all individuals, but the extent of the “damage” could vary depending on whether this style is imposed by a narcissist supervisor or not. For example, pressuring language and behaviors by a supervisor in order to achieve a common goal might not be as motivationally damaging to a narcissist subordinate when the pressure is serving the narcissist’s own agenda. Finally, the role of culture warrants empirical investigation. For example, controlling or undermining others to achieve desirable outcomes may be more socially tolerable (and therefore easier to achieve) when narcissists are in collectivistic rather than individualistic societies, perhaps due to stronger compliance norms in collectivistic cultures (Reeve, 2009). Regardless, the potential for gaining insights into narcissism in the backdrop of SDT, and for further clarifying tenets of SDT through the cross-fertilization of ideas and methods from the narcissism literature, is promising and exciting.

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